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Title:

Press release - Hospitals and Hospital Services

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HOSPITALS AT CRISIS POINT.

The public hospitals of South Australia are now at crisis point. From 1945 on, until the Labor Government took office in 1965, this State spent less per head of population on health and hospitals than any other State. The under-spending was so bad that by 1965 this State had fewer trained medical staff and fewer trained nursing staff, in proportion to population, than any other State.

THE L.C.L.'S FAILURE TO INCREASE EXPENDITURE.

When Labor took office, in three years we increased the expenditure per head of population on health and hospitals by 55%, and in addition to that, we provided for revenue from the State Lottery instituted under Labor Government to be used on hospital services. For the last two years, the LCL Government has not continued that course of increasing hospitals expenditure. During Labor's previous term of office, it was impossible in three years to overtake the lag in hospitals expenditure and medical and nursing training that had occurred over the previous 30 years under LCL Governments.

TWO NEW GENERAL TEACHING HOSPITALS NEEDED.

When Labor was in office, we planned urgently two new general hospitals, both of which were to contain teaching facilities. The Modbury Hospital, which was started before we left office, was to provide extra teaching facilities for Adelaide University. The South Western Districts Hospital, at Flinders University, was to provide a second medical school for the State which would have helped overcome these critical years we now face. Plans were ready for submission to the Public Works Standing Committee, for investigation, in September of 1968. We wanted to enable students to undertake their clinical training work at the earliest possible date. What has happened now, under the LCL, is that the work on the Modbury Hospital has been delayed, and the plans for the South Western Districts Hospital have not been presented by the present Government to the Public Works Standing Committee, which under the Constitution must investigate them before building can proceed.

DISASTROUS TWOYEAR DELAY.

This means we have had a two-year delay in the building of the South Western Districts Hospital. In the meantime, the two major public hospitals - The Queen Elizabeth and Royal Adelaide - are critically full, particularly during winter months. The disastrous result is as follows: Operating lists are cancelled, non-urgent but still serious cases have delayed admission to hospital, patients are being discharged from hospital prematurely, and patients who really need bed treatment are only treated as outpatients.

At present because of Government inaction, 192 beds at the Royal Adelaide Hospital are unoccupied because there is not the nursing staff to service them, even though the present nursing staffs have enormously increased their work loads to try and save the situation. As an indication of availability of facilities at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the occupancy rate for the General section is now constantly just on 100%.

GOVERNMENT FIGURES DISTORT FACTS.

At present, figures are being used to distort the facts. The figures published by the Government to show a lower bed occupancy rate have been arrived at by lumping together empty beds in the Maternity Section and beds not available for general use, such as emergency paraplegic beds and children's cots in a cardiac unit. This gives a completely deceptive indication of the demand for hospital beds.

HUGE DELAYS IN PATIENT CARE.

But in fact, over recent months at Queen Elizabeth Hospital urgent appointments for medical outpatients have been delayed up to six weeks. In the case of the Eye Clinic, delays of greater than 12 months have been and are now common.

URGENT PLANS OF LABOUR.

The Labor Government insists that the situation must end. We will proceed urgently with the two new major public hospitals in the metropolitan area - the Modbury and the South Western Districts Hospitals - which we were responsible for initiating. In addition, we will build the Port Augusta Hospital for which we carried out the planning. We will again devote a high proportion of revenue to Health and Hospital services, in an endeavour to overcome the backlog of neglect by Liberal Governments.

HOSPITAL STAFFS -- BREAKDOWN NEAR.

The staffing position of hospitals in South Australia will shortly completely break down unless urgent action is taken. The situation now revealed in general public hospitals is an absolute disgrace, and the reaction of the present Government can only be termed criminal. Those are strong words. Let me tell you the facts upon which I base them. Resident Medical Officers at the moment spend far too much of their time on purely clerical and administrative duties, which ought to be performed by clerical staff to allow doctors to give greater patient care. Then, Registrars have far too heavy a clinical-patient load to be able to carry out their duties and to work for their qualifications.

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But the worst situation of all is in the case of nurses. Our hospitals are badly understaffed by nurses, so badly that patient care is dangerously deteriorating. Cases have been reported to the Government that drugs are sometimes given in wrong dosage or to the wrong patients because nurses are carrying a load which is too heavy for safety. Nurses themselves have testified that patients have died, who need not have died, simply because the requisite care could not be given. A safe-working load is 6 patients per shift per nurse, but nurses are at the moment carrying 15 to 18 patients per shift. They are forced to work in intensive care units as trainee nurses, but have no formal training in the use of complex equipment involved. They are expected to attend lectures when they have rostered days off, and when some are working on night duty. Their present course is inadequate, and there is no formal training at all in the essentials of modern patient care, sociology,

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The protests of nurses to the Government have been constantly ignored. Their salaries are poor, and a recent wage increase was rendered useless because a simultaneous increase in fees for board and lodging was imposed on them. Nursing resignations are high. Recruitment is falling. The waiting list for entry into nursing training at Queen Elizabeth Hospital has in the last three years fallen from 12 months' waiting to no waiting at all. A recent advertisement in a local paper for trainee nurses at Queen Elizabeth drew not one reply.

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The bitterness and dissatisfaction amongst nursing and medical staff of hospitals has grown to boiling point. It is quite apparent that there is an effective breakdown in communication between administration and staff.

OBVIOUS STEPS TO BE TAKEN.

I cannot suggest that this is a situation which can be cured overnight. It cannot be from its very complex nature. But there are obvious steps which must be taken and which will be taken by a Labor Government. Action is urgent now to ensure that the situation in our public hospitals is retrieved and improved. Care and training must be brought to a proper standard. The Labor Government, therefore, will intervene to ensure better rewards and conditions for nurses and to relieve the load on registrars. It is possible for Governments to intervene in industrial cases and to give instructions to Government advocates to support employees' claims for improvements. A Labor Government would do so in the case of nurses as we did when last in office in support of police and general wage claims. We will provide adequate administrative and clerical staff to release residents for their proper duties. We will negotiate with the honorary staff to work towards the position of a permanent salaried medical staff to replace the honorary system. In addition, we will restructure the hospitals administration so that there is adequate knowledge of decisions and satisfactory processes of discussion between staff at all levels and administration.

NEW NURSES' TRAINING.

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MENTAL HEALTH.

In Mental Health services, we will reconstitute the geriatric unit, and we will proceed with our previously planned course of expansion of Mental Health services. Under the last Labor Government in a short time, this State had the smallest proportion of population in mental hospitals of any State,

and a constantly falling rate was being achieved. But at the moment there are only 85 beds provided by the LCL Government for chronically ill patients. The result is that general hospital beds, which ought not to be used for chronically ill patients, are at times occupied by them to the exclusion of patients needing urgent treatment. We will expand provision for chronically ill patients and co-ordinate the whole work of geriatric services in South Australia to ensure that people who are in dire need have that need met.

LABOR SEEKS RAPID IMPROVEMENT OF HOSPITAL SERVICES.

Under the Labor Government, there was a rapid improvement in hospital services. We will seek to set that pace again and to provide an administration which listens to those who are involved in the problems we are dealing with. You can be sure that when the nurses of this State approach a Labor Minister of Health, they won't be told in the face of the facts that the situation in South Australian nursing is the best in the world, and you can be sure that he won't demand an apology for their statements concerning the deficiencies in the system before he will talk to them. That is what the nurses have had to face under the present Government.

THE HEALTH, NURSING AND HOSPITALS SECTION OF
THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY'S POLICY SPEECH - 1970.

South Australia will be a healthy State. The present facilities at the Royal Adelaide Hospital and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital are hopelessly overtaxed. People urgently needing hospital treatment are unable to get it. Needed operations are postponed. The previous Labor Government had planned both a hospital at Modbury and a South-Western Districts Hospital at Flinders University which incorporated a new teaching hospital facility. And although the new teaching hospital was designed and ready to go to the Public Works Standing Committee for report in September of 1968, the present Government has not yet produced the plan. It is vital for South Australia to proceed with additional hospital facilities, and these two hospitals along with the new Port Augusta General Hospital will be pursued by the Labor Government.

The situation of nurses in South Australia is completely unsatisfactory. We have bitter discontent and inadequate recruitment. There are 192 beds vacant in the Royal Adelaide Hospital's North and East Wings because of inadequate nursing staff numbers. Nurses have pointed to a dangerous deterioration in patient care because of excessive hours of overworking by the existing staff.

A Labor Government will intervene to improve the rewards and conditions of nurses. More nursing aides will be recruited to work under nurses' supervision, to do work which does not need full nursing qualifications and so release nurses for their proper tasks.

We will set up a Nurses' Training College as recommended by the Truskett Committee. It will have the status of a College of Advanced Education, and will thus attract Commonwealth Funds. Decentralized training and training in the employer's time will be provided.

We will work towards abolishing the Honorary system, and appointing full-time and part-time consultant staffs in hospitals. Conditions for Registrars and Residents in hospitals will be improved.

We will continue with the programme which we commenced in 1965/66 of extending hospital service and accommodation and treatment programmes for the mentally ill and intellectually retarded. We will extend the community preventive treatment programmes.

Labor will reverse the present Government's decision to disband the Mental Health Services Geriatric Unit, and action will be taken to increase the infirmary accommodation and to make fullest use of Commonwealth subsidy for this purpose. Adequate accommodation for old people and the chronically ill must be ensured, and this will help relieve the present general hospital bed shortage.

It is our opinion that the indiscriminate use and distribution of drugs in the community is not in the best interests of people generally, particularly in the case of the young people. We will take action to bring to the notice of everybody -- the mature and the young -- the harmful effects of the taking of drugs without medical supervision. We will also take action to provide for severe penalties for people convicted of the illegal distribution of drugs.

Authorized by : M. J. Young,
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